

Battle of Gettysburg

This most famous and most important Civil War Battle occurred over three hot summer days, July 1 to July 3, 1863, around the small market town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It began as a skirmish but by its end involved 160,000 Americans.

Before the battle, major cities in the North such as Philadelphia, Baltimore and even Washington were under threat of attack from General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia which had crossed the Potomac River and marched into Pennsylvania.

The Union Army of the Potomac under its very new and untried commander, General George G. Meade, marched to intercept Lee.

On Tuesday morning, June 30, an infantry brigade of Confederate soldiers searching for shoes headed toward Gettysburg (population 2,400). The Confederate commander looked through his field glasses and spotted a long column of Federal cavalry heading toward the town. He withdrew his brigade and informed his superior, Gen. Henry Heth, who in turn told his superior, A.P. Hill, he would go back the following morning and "get those shoes."

Wednesday morning, July 1, two divisions of Confederates headed back to Gettysburg. They ran into Federal cavalry west of the town at Willoughby Run and the skirmish began. Events would quickly escalate. Lee rushed 25,000 men to the scene. The Union had less than 20,000.

After much fierce fighting and heavy casualties on both sides, the Federals were pushed back through the town of Gettysburg and regrouped south of the town along the high ground near the cemetery. Lee ordered Confederate General R.S. Ewell to seize the high ground from the battle weary Federals "if practicable." Gen. Ewell hesitated to attack thereby giving the Union troops a chance to dig in along Cemetery Ridge and bring in reinforcements with artillery. By the time Lee realized Ewell had not attacked, the opportunity had vanished.

Meade arrived at the scene and thought it was an ideal place to do battle with Lee's Army. Meade anticipated reinforcements totaling up to 100,000 men to arrive and strengthen his defensive position.

Confederate General James Longstreet saw the Union position as nearly impregnable and told Lee it should be left alone. He argued that Lee's Army should instead move east between the Union Army and Washington and build a defensive position thus forcing the Federals to attack them instead.

But Lee believed his own army was invincible and he was also without his much needed cavalry which served as his eyes and ears during troop movements. Cavalry leader Jeb Stuart had gone off with his troops to harass the Federals. Stuart's expedition would turn out to be for the most part a wild goose chase which left Lee at a disadvantage until he returned.

Lee decided to attack the Union Army's defensive position at the southern end of Cemetery Ridge which he thought was less well defended.

About 10 a.m. the next morning, Thursday, July 2, Gen. Longstreet was ordered by Lee to attack. But Longstreet was quite slow in getting his troops into position and didn't attack until 4 p.m. that afternoon thus giving the Union Army even more time to strengthen its position.

When Longstreet attacked, some of the most bitter fighting of the Civil War erupted at places now part of American military folklore such as Little Round Top, Devil's Den, the Wheat Field and the Peach Orchard. Longstreet took the Peach Orchard but was driven back at Little Round Top.

About 6:30 p.m. Gen. Ewell attacked the Union line from the north and east at Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill. The attack lasted into darkness but was finally unsuccessful at Cemetery Hill, although the Rebels seized some trenches on Culp's Hill.

By about 10:30 p.m., the day's fighting came to an end. The Federals had lost some ground during the Rebel onslaught but still held the strong defensive position along Cemetery Ridge.

Both sides regrouped and counted their casualties while the moaning and sobbing of thousands of wounded men on the slopes and meadows south of Gettysburg could be heard throughout the night under the blue light of a full moon.

Generals from each side gathered in war councils to plan for the coming day. Union commander Meade decided his army would remain in place and wait for Lee to attack. On the Confederate side, Longstreet once again tried to talk Lee out of attacking such a strong position. But Lee thought the battered Union soldiers were nearly beaten and would collapse under one final push.

Lee decided to gamble to win the Battle of Gettysburg and in effect win the Civil War by attacking the next day at the center of the Union line along Cemetery Ridge where it would be least expected. To do this he would send in the fresh troops of Gen. George Pickett. Along with this, Gen. Ewell would renew the assault on Culp's hill.

But as dawn broke on Friday, July 3, about 4:30 a.m., Lee's timetable was undermined as Union cannons pounded the Rebels on Culp's Hill to drive them from the trenches. The Rebels did not withdraw, but instead attacked the Federals around 8 a.m. Thus began a vicious three hour struggle with the Rebels charging time after time up the hill only to be beaten back. The Federals finally counter attacked and drove the Rebels off the hill and east across Rock Creek. Around 11 a.m. the fighting on Culp's Hill stopped. An eerie quiet settled over the whole battlefield.

Once again Lee encountered opposition to his battle plan from Longstreet. Lee estimated about 15,000 men would participate in the Rebel charge on Cemetery Ridge. Longstreet responded, "It is my opinion that no 15,000 men ever arrayed for battle can take that position." But Lee was unmoved. The plan would go on as ordered.

Throughout the morning and into the afternoon amid 90° heat and stifling humidity the Rebels moved into position in the woods opposite Cemetery Ridge for the coming charge. Interestingly, some Union troops were moved away from Cemetery Ridge on Meade's orders because he thought Lee would attack again in the south. Several hours before, Meade had correctly predicted

Lee would attack the center, but now thought otherwise. He left only 5,750 infantrymen stretched out along the half-mile front to initially face the 15,000 man Rebel charge.

Lee sent Jeb Stuart's recently returned cavalry to go behind the Union position in order to divert Federal forces from the main battle area. Around noon, Union and Confederate cavalry troops clashed three miles east of Gettysburg but Stuart was eventually repulsed by punishing cannon fire and the Union cavalry led in part by 23 year old Gen. George Custer. The diversion attempt failed.

Back at the main battle site, just after 1 p.m. about 170 Confederate cannons opened fire on the Union position on Cemetery Ridge to pave the way for the Rebel charge. This was the heaviest artillery barrage of the war but many of the Rebel shells missed their targets and flew harmlessly overhead.

The Federals returned heavy cannon fire and soon big clouds of blinding smoke and dust hung over the battlefield. Around 2:30 p.m. the Federals slowed their rate of fire, then ceased, to conserve ammunition and to fool the Rebels into thinking the cannons were knocked out - exactly what the Rebels did think.

Pickett went to see Longstreet and asked, "General, shall I advance?" Longstreet, now overwhelmed with emotion, did not respond, but simply bowed his head and raised his hand. Thus the order was given.

"Charge the enemy and remember old Virginia!" yelled Pickett as 12,000 Rebels formed an orderly line that stretched a mile from flank to flank. In deliberate silence and with military pageantry from days gone by, they slowly headed toward the Union Army a mile away on Cemetery Ridge as the Federals gazed in silent wonder at this spectacular sight.

But as the Rebels got within range, Federal cannons using grapeshot (a shell containing iron balls that flew apart when fired) and deadly accurate rifle volleys ripped into the Rebels killing many and tearing holes in the advancing line. What had been, just moments before, a majestic line of Rebel infantry, quickly became a horrible mess of dismembered bodies and dying wounded accompanied by a mournful roar. But the Rebels continued on.

As they got very close, the Rebels stopped and fired their rifles once at the Federals then lowered their bayonets and commenced a running charge while screaming the Rebel yell.

A fierce battle raged for an hour with much brutal hand to hand fighting, shooting at close range and stabbing with bayonets. For a brief moment, the Rebels nearly had their chosen objective, a small clump of oak trees atop Cemetery Ridge. But Union reinforcements and regrouped infantry units swarmed in and opened fire on the Rebel ranks. The battered, outnumbered Rebels finally began to give way and this great human wave that had been Pickett's Charge began to recede as the men drifted back down the slope. The supreme effort of Lee's army had been beaten back, leaving 7,500 of his men lying on the field of battle.

Lee rode out and met the survivors, telling them, "It is all my fault." And to Pickett he said, "Upon my shoulders rests the blame." Later when he got back to headquarters Lee exclaimed, "Too bad. Too bad! Oh, too bad!" The gamble had failed. The tide of the war was now permanently turned against the South.

Confederate casualties in dead, wounded and missing were 28,000 out of 75,000. Union casualties were 23,000 out of 88,000.

That night and into the next day, Saturday, July 4, Confederate wounded were loaded aboard wagons that began the journey back toward the South. Lee was forced to abandon his dead and begin a long slow withdrawal of his army back to Virginia. Union commander Meade, out of fatigue and caution, did not immediately pursue Lee, infuriating President Lincoln who wrote a bitter letter to Meade (never delivered) saying he missed a "golden opportunity" to end the war right there.

On November 19, President Lincoln went to the battlefield to dedicate it as a military cemetery. The main orator, Edward Everett of Massachusetts, delivered a two hour formal address. The president then had his turn. He spoke in his high, penetrating voice and in a little over two minutes delivered the Gettysburg Address, surprising many in the audience by its shortness and leaving others quite unimpressed.

Over time, however, the speech and its words - government of the People, by the People, for the People - have come to symbolize the definition of democracy itself.